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ABSTRACT

For Mexican American students, grade-level reading and overall academic achievement decline, as measured by standardized tests, as they progress through the educational system. By grade seven, 65% of Mexican American students fail one or more grade levels below expected achievement. To reverse this trend of academic failure, teachers need to use instructional strategies that are effective with Hispanic students. Junior high teachers will want to provide clear and concise sequential steps in assignments, devise a variety of activities using English language and reading skills, strive for effective English instruction, alert students to reading skills they possess, recognize students' varying language and reading skill levels, and provide individual instruction as needed. High school teachers should become more proficient in teaching reading skills, provide students with appropriate labels for reading skills, and encourage students to apply collateral cognitive processes to all reading assignments. Fifteen references dealing with reading instruction and minority students are appended. (JHZ)

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READING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF HISPANIC STUDENTS IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: SOME SPECIFIC STRATEGIES.

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ERIC DIGEST

MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

READING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF HISPANIC STUDENTS IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: SOME SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

Mexican American students comprise the youngest and largest segment of Hispanics in American public schools. Their grade-level reading and overall academic achievement decline, as measured by standardized tests, as they progress through the educational system. By grade seven, 65% of Mexican American students fail one or more grade levels below expected achievement. This pronounced deficiency among minority students obviously needs to be addressed. An introductory digest provides junior and senior high school teachers and students (and their parents) with strategies for developing and applying reading skills in all subjects.

The Current State of Hispanic Education in America

Mexican American attrition in junior and senior high schools is the highest among all races and ethnic groups. The dropout rate at the junior high school level is 43%; at the high school level it is 6% (Dolman & Kaufman, 1984). Since Hispanics are the largest, youngest and fastest-growing group of students attending public schools (Carter, 1979; Boyer, 1983), their educational needs must be attended to.

This multifaceted educational neglect is mainly philosophical and theoretical. The philosophical "melting pot" base tends to exclude individuals who do not fit the mold, while the theoretical discourages those whose first language is not English. In order to function in American society, non-English speaking students must learn the language. Their learning, however, can be encouraged and enhanced by a more positive pedagogical approach in the classroom. One very telling and immediate suggestion is for teachers to recognize and incorporate into that classroom the Hispanic's valuable twin resources: his language and his culture.

Since language mastery precedes reading instruction, intensive language instruction must be a part of the curriculum. Developing and shaping basic reading skills (along with other cognitive processes) improve both reading and academic proficiency. Thomas Carter (1969) indicated that in preparing teachers to teach Mexican American students, the system had three courses: (1) to change the child; (2) to change the school; or (3) to change the social system. The system has evidently seen fit to change the student. Curricula is school- and teacher-oriented, but is fast becoming student-oriented because students now lobby for accountability from the system.

Anrig (1984) asserts that Chicano students can and do achieve, given access, educational support, and encouragement. Boyer (1983) cites several examples of this fact in the Carnegie Foundation report on high schools. He also acknowledges that students generally meet teachers' expectations, and that to expect less from Chicano students is to underestimate their capacity for learning and to diminish the significance of education. Elementary school Hispanic students who have received intensive language, reading and writing instruction can be adequately prepared for secondary schooling if several tactical assumptions are implemented.

Tactical Linchpins of Hispanic Education

Four assumptions underlie the application of educational strategies: namely, that the teacher possess a knowledge of language and reading skills applicable to the subject taught; that the teacher be able to recognize and diagnose reading skill problems; that the teacher is cognizant of and sensitive to Hispanic culture--its beliefs, values and behavioral codes; and that the teacher be flexible and creative in the classroom.

The premise that reading requires "mastery" of language is part of the rationale in concentrating on the following strategies. Knowing a language includes not only its literal tongue, but also its non-literal forms. The nuances of a language include idiomatic expressions and figures of speech which enable students to infer, associate, and recognize implications. Since vocabulary acquisition is a linchpin of literacy (Beck & McKeown, 1985), and since reading comprehension and vocabulary are intimately related (Anderson & Freebody, 1981), any student who falls below the 50th percentile on a standardized pre-test in reading/vocabulary should be targeted for rich instruction. Three-dimensional instruction—frequent, rich and extended—enhances learning (White, 1985). According to the findings of the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, Hispanic students need more personal attention and daily contact, including more instructional materials, if they are to improve their reading comprehension.

Some Specific and Effective Educational Strategies

Among those strategies found effective with Hispanic students are:

- LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH (Russell G. Stauffer, 1980)
  A strategy demanding student participation in the learning process. Action between teacher and student; interaction among students. Cognitive and affective transaction is the key to this strategy; appropriate for pre-school through to adult education. Preschool children learn language and then learn to read. Here, respect is shown not only for the experiences and language students bring with them to school, but also for their heritage and natural curiosity.
- DIRECTED READING/THINKING ACTIVITIES, DRTA (Russell G. Stauffer, 1969)
  A sequential strategy designed to help student and teacher establish purposes for reading, identifying concepts and applying reading skills. Adaptable for all levels and subjects, it is particularly appropriate when students need individual attention, structure, extended activities or refinement in reading skills. It enables the teacher to identify the specific skill which warrants remediation and to initiate appropriate activities to encourage those skills (i.e., making relationships, analogies, classifying, etc.).

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- EASY STEPS TO READING IMPROVEMENT, ESTRI (Technical Learning Corp., 1975)
  This strategy, focusing on the English sound system and on writing, has structure and employs five principles of syllabication of English words. Exceptions are handled through reverse principles. Appropriate for any grade level, ESTRI encourages students with a limited English background, students having problems with the English sound system, and those with spelling difficulties.

- VOCABULARY BUILDING (Beck & Mckeown, 1985)
  A strategy for any level and subject, it helps students who have a limited vocabulary develop a more precise, more varied, vocabulary.

- CLOZE PROCEDURE (Taylor, 1953)
  The original "cloze" asks that every fifth word be omitted, but the teacher has the option of omitting the element or skill being focused. Some examples of omissions are language markers, context clues, definitions and examples within the reading material. CLOZE works for those who need to learn language structure involving any subject area.

- SURVEY, QUESTION, READ, RECITE, REVIEW, SQ3R (Robinson, 1961; Burmeister, 1977)
  A five-step strategy appropriate for all grades and subjects and designed especially for mature students to become independent in reading expository materials. Those who read at grade level can apply its techniques to improve comprehension. SQ3R not only aids students in organizing and outlining, but also assists them in developing a sequential process in reading any assignment. The teacher can thus create extension and refinement activities to develop higher levels of thinking.

- SEQUENTIAL STEPS TO READING NON-LITERAL LANGUAGE (Sherer, 1977)
  Appropriate for all grades and subjects, this strategy proposes a five-step approach to reading non-literal or figurative language (metaphors, similies, hyperboles, personification, idioms). Its steps include: defining each type of figurative language; providing signal words; helping the student see comparisons, identifying the purpose the author has in making the comparisons; deciding what similarities the author wants readers to see. This strategy helps students to understand what they read and clarify concepts, while increasing their vocabulary, improving their writing, and helping them read literature and history.

- COGNATE RECOGNITION
  In this strategy, teacher and student identify words which are the same in both languages. Using the sound systems of each language, students pronounce words in that particular reading in order to make him aware of the differences. Definitions are presented, compared, and discussed. Some examples of words are: doctor, local, adobe, etc.

- PARAGRAPH FUNCTION (Robinson, 1975)
  This strategy recognizes specific functions of paragraphs which serve as guideposts to meaning: explanatory, definitional, introductory, transitional, narrative, descriptive, summary, and conclusion. The paragraph function also establishes writing style and pattern. The essence of paragraphs is that the organized message is equal to the sum of a series of paragraphs. Applicable for any grade level and content area, this strategy strengthens structure in reading and writing. Knowing the function of the paragraph increases understanding of content and improves reading and writing.

- CRITICAL ANALYSIS (Chaffee, 1985)
  This strategy permits student-teacher interaction and involves extensive use of English. Students dissect statements, paragraphs, or essays and then reconstruct them. Students become aware of multiple denotations, connotations, euphemisms, etc., while teachers identify vague and precise language, techniques of persuasion, and differentiate among facts, opinions and propaganda. Ample opportunities occur for discussion of reasoning fallacies.

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A Coda to Current Hispanic Education

Reading is clearly crucial to academic achievement. Chicano students' academic and reading skills suffer markedly as they move through the American public school system. This decline in important achievement levels suggests that the system needs to reevaluate its current pedagogical practices regarding Hispanics.

The strategies suggested are adaptable to the needs of Mexican American students. Although they apply to most educational levels, several specific recommendations to junior high school teachers include: (1) providing clear and concise sequential steps in assignments; (2) devising a variety of activities using English language and reading skills; (3) striving for effective English instruction and, whenever possible, incorporating intensive instruction for all students who fall below grade level; (4) alerting students to reading skills they possess and prompting them to use those skills in every reading activity; (5) recognizing students' varying language and reading skills levels and constructing lesson plans accordingly; and (6) providing, as needed, individual instruction, rich vocabulary instruction, extensive reading, and opportunities to experiment with the idiomatic language.

Similarly, high school teachers should become more proficient in teaching reading skills, provide students with appropriate labels for the reading skills, and encourage students to apply collateral cognitive processes to all reading assignments. Teachers should, however, keep in mind that many students exhibit weaknesses in high-order learning skills and need frequent occasions to learn these skills and to see relationships between subjects and their underlying concepts and principles. High school teachers should, therefore, be cognizant of the principles of learning: overlearning, ordering, sizing, or programming new material, rewarding desired responses, and frequent reviews.

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